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SUBJECT: Stop the Presses! Nicaragua's largest newspaper accuses FSLN of Sabotage

REF: A) MANAGUA 1091; B) MANAGUA 1077; C) MANAGUA 1041
D) MANAGUA 1035; E) MANAGUA 959; F) MANAGUA 916; G) MANAGUA 626
H) 2007 MANAGUA 669

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On Thursday, November 19, the printing press of Nicaragua's largest daily newspaper, La Prensa, was sabotaged in what the owner believes was a politically motivated act perpetrated by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) government to silence media dissent. The sabotage, which occurred two days prior to a civil society march against the FSLN government (see Reftel A), may mark a new chapter of reprisals against media outlets openly critical of Ortega. The damage failed to significantly hinder printing operations; however, the company's technicians claim the sabotage nearly shut down the presses. End Summary.

La Prensa discovers intentional act of sabotage

¶2. (U) On November 19, the printing press of La Prensa, a center-right newspaper highly critical of President Daniel Ortega, was intentionally sabotaged in what owner Jaime Chamorro believes to be a politically motivated act by the Ortega-FSLN government. The incident occurred two days before a march against the Ortega government held by several opposition groups to protest the 2008 municipal elections fraud, the Supreme Court decision to allow Ortega's reelection and recent acts of politically motivated violence against civil society, including media outlets (see Reftel B, C, D). While cleaning the press around 8:30 a.m., workers noticed an abnormal sound and upon inspection discovered five damaged gears located in the unlocked transmission box. In the bottom of the compartment, they also found three metal bolts foreign to the press (see photos). The bolts, which had been strategically placed to cycle through the gears, damaged the machine's "teeth," causing maintenance workers to temporarily shut down part of its printing operations to replace the broken parts. The temporary delay did not hinder the printing of that day's edition since the issue had already been printed; officials repaired the press in time to print the next edition.

¶3. (U) According to Chamorro, this act of sabotage against the main printing press is the first in the paper's history. Chamorro suspects that the act was intentional since the bolts were foreign to the machine and strategically placed, signifying that only a person with distinct knowledge of the system would know where to place them to inflict maximum damage. Chamorro also acknowledge that two days prior to the sabotage, a rear entrance to the printing plant had been damaged in what appeared to be an act of vandalism, leaving the plant vulnerable to break-in. Although La Prensa officials denied the likelihood of "internal sabotage," representatives admitted the possibility that one of their own workers may have committed the sabotage. However, the paper currently has no suspects, either internal or external to the organization, based on its own investigation. La Prensa will not request a police investigation, citing "a lack of confidence" in what they view as an Ortega-led, corrupt police department. Meanwhile, the paper is taking steps to improve its internal security because replacing its printing system could cost millions of dollars.

La Prensa pins critical response to sabotage

¶4. (U) Following the incident, La Prensa published two follow-up articles about the sabotage, denouncing the fleeting civil liberties in Nicaragua.

Comments

¶5. (SBU) The possible sabotage of La Prensa may mark another chapter in an alarming trend of government operatives threatening, harassing, or sabotaging independent media outlets critical of Ortega. The Ortega Administration's increasingly hard-line stance against dissenting individuals, groups, or media outlets seems to be leading to a more motivated civil society as indicated by the large numbers who recently turned out in protest of his administration (see Reftel A). The elimination of tax exemptions for printing materials and loss of state advertising funds, coupled with a shrinking economy, is putting increasing economic and political pressure on independent media (see Reftel E, H). Despite these challenges, La Prensa's editorial against Ortega's attack on a free press signals the paper's willingness to fight intimidation by publically maintaining its critical posture.

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